Developing a Paradigm Model of Youth Leadership Development and Community Engagement: A Grounded Theory

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This grounded theory study explored the impact of community engagement on how youth leaders develop. A paradigm model illustrating this developmental process is presented, which includes the conditions that empowered the youth to engage in their community, the strategies used by the youth and the adults in their work together, the conditions that helped/hindered those strategies, and the resulting outcomes. Results of the analysis indicated that individual connections, common sentiments, and being asked to engage were identified as the most salient causal conditions. The action taken by the youth and adult respondents mobilized those individual connections and common sentiments into social capital, which was then converted into individual and community outcomes.

Keywords: youth leadership, community engagement, social capital, sense of community

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Many rural communities across the United States have declining populations. Nebraska, for example, has reported declines in 69 of 93 counties, a majority being young adults (USDA, 2006). This exodus of young people from communities is often referred to as a *brain drain*. A second concern is the diminishing involvement of young adults in community decision–making, as evidenced by low voter turnout in the 18 – 24 population age range (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003). Despite low turnout in voter registration, more students are participating in community service than ever before (Colby et al., 2003). Students are taking the lead when serving community needs, but this leadership is not reflected in civic engagement.

In response, many communities now engage their youth in civic leadership, which involves developing young leaders through community engagement. Youth influence change in their communities alongside adults in a relationship of mutuality. The goals are to (a) instill a vested interest in these youth for their community (which will hopefully result in their return to the community) and to (b) build a bridge between identifying community needs and translating that into community service (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001).

Many agricultural education scholars have studied youth leadership development within the context of 4–H or FFA, both at the youth participant level (e.g. Carter & Spotanski, 1989; Dormody & Seevers, 1994a; Dormody & Seevers, 1994b; Ricketts, Osborne, & Rudd, 2004; Ricketts & Rudd, 2005; Seevers & Dormody, 1994a, 1994b; Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997) and at the adult volunteer level (e.g. Fritz, Barbuto, Marx, Etling, & Burrow, 2000). These contexts are notable for study considering that youth development programs such as 4–H and FFA positively impact youths' leadership capabilities (Connors & Swan, 2006). A missing piece in the study of youth leadership development is perhaps the investigation of youth leadership development within the context of community outside of formal youth development programs.

Previous youth leadership development studies have utilized a variety of theoretical

frameworks. Seevers and Dormody, for example, utilized a youth leadership life skills development framework in all four of their 1994 studies. Wingenbach and Kahler (1997) and Carter and Spotanski (1989) also utilized leadership life skills, but tied them to workplace competencies. Ricketts, Osborne, and Rudd (2004) utilized McClelland's motivation theory to study adolescent female leadership development. Then, Ricketts and Rudd (2005) utilized a critical thinking theoretical framework in studying youth leaders who were 2002 National FFA Convention delegates. Two conceptual frameworks that have not been used in the study of youth leadership development to date are *social capital* and *sense of community*.

Social capital and sense of community have separately been utilized as conceptual frameworks in the study of youth development; however, a combination of the two frameworks has not been used. This combined framework provides a window of opportunity to richly describe the process of how youth leaders develop through community engagement.

Among the landmark social capital scholars, youth are viewed as passive recipients of their parents' social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Bourdieu (1986) discussed children's social capital as a futuristic entity rather than a present one. Coleman (1990) noted the importance of social capital for children, but also described children as future beneficiaries of parental social capital. Putnam (2000) highlighted the involvement of parental social capital on children's development and educational achievement. These three views created a deficit model, which was rejected by contemporary youth social capital scholars (Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007; Morrow, 1999, 2000; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Schaefer–McDaniel, 2004). These contemporary academics maintained that youth are active generators of their own social capital. For example, Holland, Reynolds, and Weller (2007) examined the significance of social capital in young people's life transitions, reporting that youth utilize social resources and networks to become independent social actors in new school settings as well as in further education and employment opportunities.

While a social capital framework is useful for examining how youth leaders develop, using social capital alone slights the influence of community engagement on that process. Schaefer–McDaniel (2004) wrote of the importance of community in social capital, noting that *sense of belonging* to a community forms a significant part of a young person's social capital framework. Holland et al. (2007) reported that the amount of social capital youth accrued through their community networks determined how well they bridged into new networks during times of transition, concluding that community is valuable to social capital debates.

The sense of community literature accounts for the impact of community on adolescent development. Sense of community refers to a person's affective feelings towards his or her community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prezzo, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001; Sarason, 1974). Pretty, Andrews, and Collett (1994) were the first to suggest that sense of community was relevant to adolescents. Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, and Williams (1996) examined how sense of community impacts adolescent well–being, discovering that social support and sense of community were distinctive aspects of adolescents' community context.

Pooley, Cohen, and Pike (2005) examined the theoretical linkage between social capital and sense of community and concluded that an opportunity exists to bring the two concepts together to enhance how community is understood: "Sense of community allows us to understand the individual's connection to the community, which is central to the concept of social capital…the definition of sense of community may inform the level of social capital within a community" (p. 78).

Connors and Swan (2006) noted that advancing an understanding of leadership development is considered "central to the agricultural education mission" (p. 2). This study aims to advance the leadership development field by utilizing a combined framework of social capital and sense of community to describe how youth leaders develop through community engagement. This theoretical framework responds to previous agricultural education critics who called for more focus and theory development in leadership development research (Connors & Swan, 2006). This study also aims to advance the field of social capital and sense of community literature by providing empirical

support for its combined use. This responds to social capital scholars such as Portes (1998) who called for a social capital analysis grounded in a contextual framework and sense of community scholars such as Pooley, Pike, Breen, and Breen (2002) who noted that research lacks in understanding how youth develop sense of community.

Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study was to construct a grounded theory that could describe the process of how youth leaders develop through community engagement. The study sought to understand (a) what conditions caused the youth to engage in their community, (b) the strategies used by the youth and the adults in their work together, (c) the conditions that helped/hindered those strategies, and (d) the resulting outcomes.

Methods/Procedures

This inquiry centered on the development of young leaders in the *context* of community. Hatch (2002) cited Bogdan and Taylor in emphasizing context in the qualitative research tradition: "[Qualitative research] directs itself at settings and the individuals within those settings holistically; that is, the subject of the study, be it an organization or an individual, is not reduced to an isolated variable or to an hypothesis, but is viewed instead as part of a whole" (p. 6). Because of the holistic focus and inductive need for this study, qualitative methodology, in particular a grounded theory tradition, seemed appropriate.

The participants for this study were selected based on their involvement in a program called HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC)—in particular, HTC's youth pillar. HomeTown Competitiveness (HTC) is a program that provides a comprehensive strategy for long–term rural community sustainability (HomeTown Competitiveness, n.d.). The 23 study participants (14 youth, six adults, and three young adults who returned) were selected from the following HTC Communities with strong youth pillar initiatives: (a) Tyler County, (b) Riley County, and (c) Lefler County.

A series of one–on–one, semi–structured, half–hour, audio–taped interviews were conducted with the aforementioned participants,

which follows the method of previous grounded theory studies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) discovered that data saturation occurred after 12 interviews. This study utilized 23 study participants to ensure data saturation. The first author also observed the youth pillar initiatives in each of the identified communities in order to gain perspective in the natural field setting of interest. Both interviews and observations allowed overall data enrichment that could not have been derived from interviews alone.

The data analysis procedure followed the standard format as outlined in prior grounded theory work (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Beginning with *open coding*, initial categories were formed in the data regarding the development of youth leaders through community engagement. Then the data were assembled using *axial coding* to identify a paradigm model, explaining a central concept to the phenomenon and its relationship to causal conditions, outcomes, action/interaction strategies, intervening conditions, and context. Third, the categories were integrated to present hypotheses using *selective coding*. Coding was conducted by the first author and confirmed by co–authors as well as an outside scholar with knowledge of the method.

Member checking (Merriam, 1998) was utilized with all of the participants on what was observed and what was said in the interviews. Participants were solicited to read through their transcript and provide feedback on errors. By using interviews, observations, and unobtrusive data, *triangulation* (Merriam, 1998) was also used as another validation procedure in order to create a more holistic approach rather than pooling judgment based on a number of researchers.

Results/Findings

Data were analyzed, reanalyzed, and then placed into the components of the *paradigm model* as recommended (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The central phenomenon is presented first followed by its context, the causal conditions, the action/interaction strategies used to manage the phenomenon, the intervening conditions that helped/hindered the action/interaction strategies, and the resulting outcomes (see Figure 1).
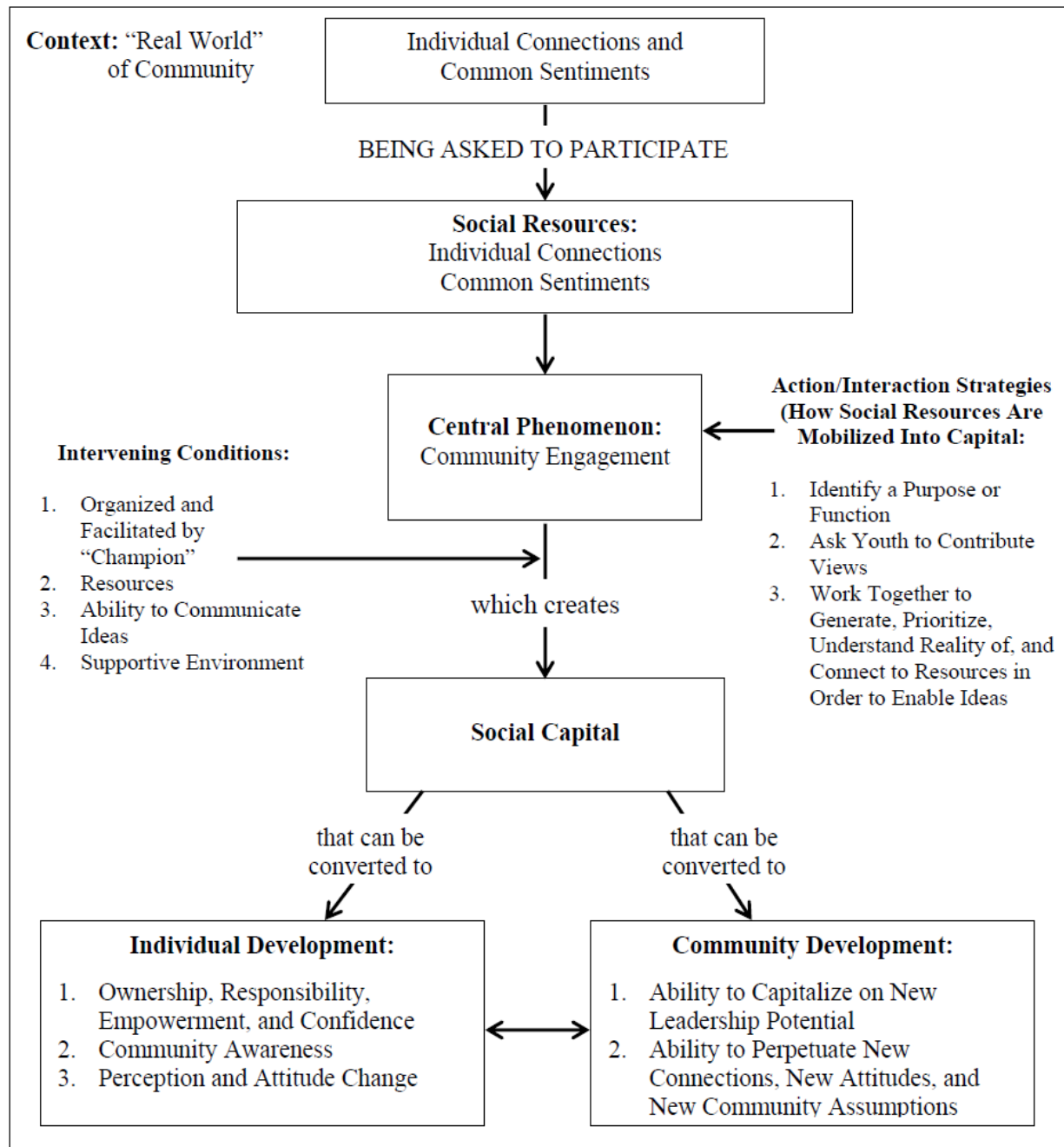

Figure 1. Paradigm model of how youth leaders develop through community engagement.

Central Phenomenon and Context

The central phenomenon presented is community engagement. The paradigm model describes how community engagement influences the development within the youth leaders.

The context of community was vital to the study. The youth participants referred to this context as the "real world." Context largely influenced the leadership development process, because these youth exercised their leadership capabilities outside of the school context.

Causal Conditions

The youth participants were asked why they engaged initially. All youth respondents reported a significant person, or individual connection, within the community who asked them to participate. The following common sentiments also surfaced among the youth and the adults as reasons for engagement: (a) youth are equal contributors to the community, (b) everyone must get involved if the community is to survive, and (c) a "willingness attitude" to get out and do something.

While individual connections and common sentiments were important causal conditions, being asked to participate was the most salient causal condition. Being asked to participate turned those individual connections and common sentiments into resources from which the respondents could draw to improve the community.

Many of the adult participants discussed the importance of asking youth to participate. Adrianne, an adult leader from Tyler County, mentioned there is more than just requesting the youth leaders to participate:

> First of all, I mean, asking them to come, explaining why we want them there. Letting them know, I guess, that we don't think they're, you know, a bunch of kids who don't care, who don't have great ideas. And then, I think just having the conversation with them and asking them to be involved and giving them reasons why.

Action/Interaction Strategies

The youth and adult respondents employed certain strategies to mobilize their social resources of individual connections and common sentiments into social capital. First, they

identified their purpose. Whenever they convened, they utilized an agenda based on current community projects or sought new project ideas.

Second, the adult leaders deliberately asked the youth to contribute their views during meetings in order to mobilize the common sentiment that "youth are equal at the table." The youth rarely volunteered their opinions without first being asked. The adult leaders discussed this strategy often in their interviews. Ellen, an adult leader in Tyler County, stated, "I think they (the adult leaders) are encouraging youth to become involved and to, you know, speak up and then not punishing them for speaking up. Saying 'thank you' or saying 'I never saw it from your point of view. Great job.'"

Third, the youth and adult leaders mobilized their social resources into capital by collaboratively generating ideas, prioritizing those ideas, understanding the reality of the ideas, and connecting to resources in order to enable the ideas. The youth leaders were forthright in generating ideas once asked; however, the adults helped the youth prioritize the ideas given restraints on time, energy, and resources. The adults also gave the youth meaningful roles. For example, two youth leaders in Lefler County were given the responsibility of presenting community improvement ideas to the city council in an attempt to vie for city dollars.

Intervening Conditions

Certain mediating factors influenced the success or failure of the action/interaction strategies. The first mediating factor was a "champion" who organized and facilitated the group. When asked why Lefler County has been successful in community improvement, Eric, an adult leader, noted, "I think it's because we have a designated coordinator, Beverly…she's totally dedicated and she's done a great job. I think that's why we have what we have."

The second mediating factor was resources—in particular, the level of connection to resources. The youth leaders recognized the amount of work necessary for securing financial resources. Ashley from Riley County noted:

> And I think Riley County has a pretty strong history of having pretty inventive leaders

and resourceful leaders, and I think they want that to continue. Because I know we've gotten certain grants as a county because of our leadership programs and because of our leadership. And I think it's good that they want to pass that on to the next generation and make sure that, when we grow up, [we] are equipped to deal with the things you have to deal with and to become good leaders.

Many respondents noted that, in order to generate ideas, prioritize ideas, and connect to resources, the members present have to be comfortable speaking publicly (the third mediating factor). Nikki, a youth leader from Tyler County, stated, "I think you have to be able to show your passion about issues and get others excited about issues…And I think you have to know how to speak just to get your point across to people."

The final intervening condition was a supportive environment. The adults created a supportive environment for the youth when they validated the youths' ideas. Ellen in Tyler County noted the importance of validation: "But, I think if the youth have an idea, we can't just instantly shoot it down and say, 'No, that's not going to work.'… We want to see them successful, but we have to sit back and let them work it out themselves." By having multiple young leaders in each group, the youth also created a supportive environment for each other. The youth appeared more comfortable engaging in collective action when they had peers for support. Reagan from Lefler County noted this: "Not just like targeting one person, but getting them as a group and then trying to involve them. Because, as youth, it's kind of really intimidating by yourself if you're going up against a bunch of adults."

Outcomes

The action/interaction strategies mobilized their individual connections and common sentiments into social capital, which then led to a series of outcomes. The social capital created was converted into both individual and community outcomes.

As a result of engaging in the community, the youth gained ownership, responsibility, empowerment, and confidence. The adults spoke of the intentional opportunities to provide ownership and responsibility for the youth. Adrianne, an adult leader from Tyler County, stated:

> And so that was a little bit hard for me at first, because I was just thinking, 'You know, I should just be running the meetings as the adult.' But, we went to our training, we went to a couple national trainings with them, and we just learned a lot about youth–adult partnerships. And I think that concept is just awesome…I make sure that they have a lot of ownership, I guess, over the group, because they need to have that or they're not going to be as involved or care as much.

Henry, a youth leader from Tyler County, confirmed this outcome when he spoke of the changes in the Tyler County youth pillar initiative between his first and second exposure. He was part of the initiative as a freshman, then he moved to Washington, D.C. to be a legislative page as a sophomore, and he returned to his home community his junior year and reengaged. He stated:

> …Even when I left, I felt somewhat helpless I guess. You look at Tyler City, and I was kind of thinking less of 'what difference can I make here?' and more of 'how can I get out of here?' So, when I came back, I saw that these kids were actually making a difference, and this program which I had left had actually grown up a long ways when I got back. So, I guess I felt somewhat empowered, and, 'Wow, we're actually doing something.' So that got me excited, more so than ever.

The second individual outcome was community awareness. Amanda, a youth leader from Lefler County, discussed the impact of community awareness on future plans: "After seeing the progress made in our community, like, that's what I want to do no matter where I end up living. You know, trying to find your own way to enhance the place where you're at."

The most significant individual–level outcome was changed attitudes and perceptions. The development of social capital within the youth appeared to renew the adults' sense of community. Alana, an adult leader from Riley

County, told a story of how one girl's sense of community changed the adults' attitudes:

> People couldn't get over that this young lady stood up there and spoke to 230 people so articulately and about a topic that it seems like we're just all scared to say: 'Yeah—Riley City's a great place to live.'…we're starting to see that young people have something to say… And when they stand up and talk, they make great sense.

Two community outcomes were also witnessed. Each of the participating communities had an ability to (a) capitalize on new leadership potential and (b) perpetuate new connections, attitudes, and community assumptions.

Each participating community capitalized on new leadership potential by developing an influential subgroup—the youth. David, an adult leader from Riley County, spoke to this influential capacity when he described Riley County youth in action with a local school board:

> They've (the youth) met in this very room and presented to the board. And I've been meeting with the board, and I've seen the board in action for probably eight years. I have never seen the board so interested and so engaged in these young leaders. They had them right there, eating out of the palm of their hand. And, in fact…that meeting was the lynch pin for the school to go ahead and make the commitment: 'We're going to build this [engagement initiative] all the way up (through middle and high school grade levels).'

The second community outcome was the ability to perpetuate new connections, new attitudes, and new community assumptions. Nikki, a youth leader from Tyler County, discussed the impact of the Tyler County youth pillar initiative on community sentiment, especially among peers:

> I think we've totally turned around the stereotype of Tyler City. Because, before, I mean when I was a freshman, everybody [said], 'Oh, I can't wait to get out of this place.' And now, I would have to say

probably 60% of my friends are planning to move back to Tyler City after they graduate. And that's not how it has been in the past. I think we're making Tyler City more appealing to adults also for their children to live in, because before the youth task force, there was really nothing for teenagers to do as far as community involvement. And now that everybody knows about it, it's like, 'Oh, well my kid's in high school, I really want him to be a part of that.'

By engaging youth leaders, the youth and adults were not the only beneficiaries. The community discovered new leadership potential and perpetuated new community sentiment.

Conclusion/Recommendations/Implications

Implications and practical recommendations of grounded theory studies must be used cautiously due to the nature of this method. The objective of this grounded theory was to inductively generate a theory of youth leadership development within the context of community engagement. The major findings of this study, however, allude to practical and research implications.

The first practical implication surfaces in the transfer of learning. The young leaders in the study developed in the *context* of community and had success exerting influence upon their community as a result of their experience. Therefore, the *real world* context appears to be key, as youth leaders develop largely in the context of school currently. When youth leaders develop in the context of community in addition to the context of school, the transfer of learning "jump" as an adult can perhaps be smaller. For example, transferring skills developed from being FFA president to being president of the Chamber of Commerce as an adult is perhaps more difficult than transferring skills from a youth–adult task force dedicated to community improvement. If youth leaders involved in agricultural education or FFA are similar to the youth leaders in this study, then agricultural education instructors, FFA advisors, and leadership development practitioners could benefit from this information by encouraging students to pursue leadership development experiences within the community, such as serving as youth representatives on existing

community boards, applying to serve on a community improvement taskforce, or seeking relationships with adult community leaders to start such a taskforce. This implication is supported by Kelsey and Wall's (2003) conclusion that while the agricultural leadership program in their case study increased awareness of rural community development importance, the program failed to move the participants to action by creating community leaders.

The second practical implication surfaces within the community. The young leaders in this study demonstrated significant influential power (students talking with the school board as one example). By developing young leaders in the community context, the community develops perhaps an influential subgroup. Community leaders could benefit from this study by establishing youth seats on community boards and working with local teachers and administrators to identify young leaders to fill those seats. Figure 1 illustrated that while individual connections and common sentiments encouraged the youth leaders at study to engage in their community, *being asked* was a more likely cause for participation. The youth respondents all reported one person within the community who encouraged participation. Thus, community leaders should be deliberate about asking the identified youth to participate.

Future research may benefit from employing a longitudinal study examining youth leaders' continued community engagement as an adult. This study was conducted at a single point in time—a longitudinal design may be capable of capturing different stages of development as well as behavioral changes resulting from that development. Future studies should test other antecedents of youth engagement in community activities as well as analyze pieces of the model presented in this study and their relationships. Studying other leadership development contexts,

such as youth–adult community improvement work in urban settings, may also prove beneficial. This study demonstrated the benefit of using a combined social capital and sense of community framework. Extending the research described in this paper requires a quantitative examination of the relationship between social capital and sense of community. Without such a piece, empirical confirmation of relationships between social capital and sense of community will remain speculative.

The purpose of this study was to develop a grounded theory to describe the process of how youth leaders develop through community engagement. Through a series of semi–structured interviews and observations, a paradigm model was created that depicted (a) what conditions caused the youth to engage in their community, (b) the strategies used by the youth and the adults in their work together, (c) the conditions that helped/hindered those strategies, and (d) the resulting outcomes utilizing the interplay between social capital and sense of community. This study advanced the leadership development field by utilizing a combined theoretical framework of social capital and sense of community to describe how youth leaders develop through community engagement. Further, this study advanced the field of social capital and sense of community literature by providing empirical support for the use of a combined framework. As noted earlier, Pooley, Cohen, and Pike (2005) contended that, "…the definition of sense of community may inform the level of social capital within the community" (p. 78). The findings of this study indicate the converse: the level of social capital may, instead, inform the level of sense of community. The authors contend that much work is needed to confirm and extend this dialogue.

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